



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

"Behold Your God!"

Isaiah 40.9

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Introduction

1. I once heard Richard Baggett of Eastern European Mission quote a Ukrainian teacher to show why their Bible teaching program was welcome in that country: "We're tired of looking at our kids' empty eyes."
2. After the Soviet Union fell, its former countries experienced a moral crisis. Though it had been flawed, the previous order had behavioral standards. When order disintegrated, chaos replaced it. The challenge that resulted was illustrated by the fact that many boys sought to join the mafia and many girls wanted to be prostitutes. Both choices offered prospects for better living standards than could be attained through traditional means.
3. As I listened to those things, my thoughts went beyond the observation that Russian students can study the Bible in schools while American students cannot. Our concern should go deeper. We do well to ask what we will need to experience before our society understands what the Ukrainians learned.
4. How do we help people in see their need for God and willingly comply with his efforts to transform them into the image of his Son (see Rom 8.29; 2 Cor 3.18)?
5. The majestic passages beginning in Isaiah 40 help us begin to answer. They focus our attention on what Jesus said constitutes eternal life—knowing God (see John 17.3). In studying them, we find benefits that go beyond the concerns mentioned above.
6. We'll begin our series with an overview of Isaiah and his teaching about God.

Body

- I. Welcome to Isaiah.
 - A. Because of its length, depth, complicated layout, and frequent use in New Testament texts, we are often content to cite isolated passages from Isaiah. What is the book about?
 - B. Even a casual reading reveals a definite shift in direction and tone between chapters 39 and 40 (note 39.5-7 in contrast with 40.1-2). The way certain key terms are used in the respective sections illustrates the difference. Notice words relating to:
 1. Judgment: 16 times in chapters 1-39; 4 times in chapters 40-66.

2. Destruction: 10 times in chapters 1-39; 4 times in chapters 40-66.
3. Redemption and restoration: 5 times in chapters 1-39; 26 times in chapters 40-66.
- C. An important concept that helps us understand the book's aim is the contrast between "former" and "latter" things/times.
 1. See 9.1; 65.16-17; and esp. 43.18-19 (also note 41.22; 42.9; 43.9; 46.9; 48.3; 61.4).
 2. "It is argued ... that 'former things' refers to the harsh judgment of Yahweh culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile, and 'latter things' are the promises of Yahweh for the restoration after the Exile."¹
- D. Seeing this point prepares us to a look at the burden of Isaiah.
 1. The book covers a span of two centuries, from ca. 750 BC, when Assyria was Israel's primary threat, to the mid-500s after Babylon destroyed Jerusalem.²
 2. As it is singled out for destruction and then promised deliverance and hope Jerusalem stands for the whole nation.³ Notice:
 - a) Isaiah 3.1, 8 where Jerusalem is under judgment.
 - b) Isaiah 40.2; 44.28 where Jerusalem is addressed in exile and given assurance equal to its need.
 - c) Isaiah 65.18-19 where Jerusalem is promised healing, restoration, ransom, and forgiveness.
 3. "It is Jerusalem, the meeting place of divine will and historical reality, that is the recipient of Yahweh's judgment and Yahweh's renewing comfort and mercy. All of this is described at the outset, where the whole course of Jerusalem and the entire sequence of the book are laid out (1:21-27)" (Brueggemann, 2).

II. Isaiah's Solution to a Nation in Trouble.

- A. This overview of the book helps us to see its day-to-day concerns in the right way.
 1. On the surface, the book is concerned primarily with the political survival of Judah in the face of Babylonian conquest.
 2. In truth, there are three characters in the story: Judah, Babylon and Yahweh.
 - a) Judah is the weaker state, afflicted because she failed to keep covenant with God.
 - b) Babylon is the mighty oppressor who is in fact an agent of God against Judah and ultimately under his control (as the references to Cyrus in 44.28; 45.1 show).
 - c) God is the main actor "who decrees emancipation for Judah, who offers assurances of solidarity with Judah, and who intervenes powerfully to assure the ineffectiveness of Babylon and the resultant well-being of Judah. The poetry revolves around the contest between Yahweh and Babylon, and the passionate bid for Judah to trust Yahweh rather than Babylon" (Brueggemann, 11).
- B. We see this most clearly when we examine two other important themes in Isaiah.
 1. The first is the idea of "gospel" (*basar*), the use of which in Isaiah actually forms the basis for its later use in the New Testament.
 - a) See 40.9; 41.27; 52.7; also 60.6; 61.1 (the word never appears in chs 1-39).
 - b) "*The news is that Yahweh has won, Babylon has lost, Judah is free*" (Brueggemann, 11).
 2. This news is good because the book—and history—is really about Yahweh.
 - a) Isaiah's favorite description of the Lord is "the Holy One of Israel" (or just "Holy One"); the nearly equal use of this phrase in both halves of the book unifies it.

- (1) 14 times in chapters 1-39: 1.4; 5.19, 24; 10.17, 20; 12.6; 17.7; 29.19, 23; 30.11, 12, 15; 31.1; 37.23
- (2) 16 times in chapters 40-66: 40.25; 41.14, 16, 20; 43.3, 14, 15; 45.11; 47.4; 48.17; 49.7; 54.5; 55.5; 60.9, 14.
- b) "The text tradition that insists upon the centrality of *the* Holy One is a gospel (40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 61:1). It is news about what God has decided, decreed, and is doing that makes a decisive difference in the world. It is a summons to *faith* (7:9; 30:15) that insists that Yahweh be relied upon in every circumstance of life. The *gospel* to be received in *faith* is an offer of *comfort* (40:1; 49:13; 51:3; 52:9; 61:2; 66:13) in the midst of every crisis" (Brueggemann, 7).

C. Isaiah gave direction and hope to a morally declining nation by calling for focus on God.

III. Behold Your God! — The Answer for Christians in Troubled Times.

- A. A closer look at God fits what Jesus said is our purpose: to know God (see John 17.3).
- B. A closer look at God also enhances our security in times of trouble.
 - 1. Who wins an election, achieves world dominance, or controls international economics should not be of primary concern for God's people.
 - 2. If we trust God's faithfulness we also should not be overly concerned about "the collapse of traditional certitudes and the demise of a covenantal social infrastructure" (Brueggemann, 7).

Conclusion

- 1. John Piper once determined to preach on the holiness of God from Isaiah 6.1-4. He reported having to resist the temptation to move away from that theme in the interest of making application. He remained true to his aim, but was sure he would be criticized by some who would say, "But people are hurting, and you have said nothing to ease their pain."
- 2. That concern was laid to rest a few weeks later when a man took him aside and told him about problems that had contributed to the hardest months of a family's lives. The man said, "Do you know what has gotten me through? The vision of the greatness of God's holiness that you gave me the first week of January. It has been the rock we could stand on."⁴
- 3. Piper said, "People are starving for the greatness of God. But most of them would not give this diagnosis of their troubled lives. The majesty of God is an unknown cure" (Piper, 9).
- 4. Let us devote ourselves to showing them his greatness.

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Notes

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 4.

² I am among those who see the book as a unity, written by a prophet with predictive abilities. This is not the majority view in scholarship today. However, Brueggemann, pp. 3-10, notes that more recent scholarship is moving closer to a position that points to what is called a canonical approach to the book. This move has been made because of the obvious thematic similarities between the different sections of the writing (chapters 1-39, 40-55, 56-66).

³ Isaiah has 115 references to "Jerusalem" or "Zion" and another 40+ uses of "city" that refer to Jerusalem.

⁴ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990), 9-10.